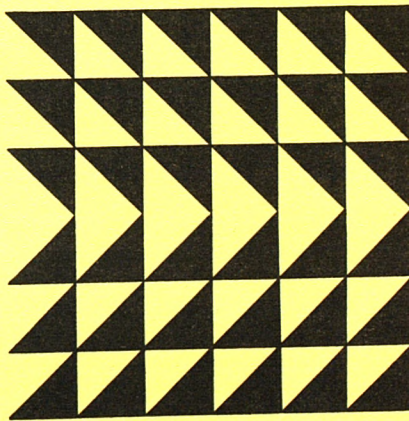


Ronald B. Koertge's

B I R D M A N O F L O N G B E A C H and
O T H E R P O E M S



Seeing and Believing

In the days before poems I lived in a \$48.00/month apartment only 50 ft. from and about 70 ft. above a railroad track.

It was a pretty nice apt, and the location is what made it cheap, that and the neighborhood: Aug. 5 newspapers still lying around

in Sept, winos under the RR bridge, kids in torn T-shirts 11 months out of the year, a perfect set-up for the Times squalor-photo award.

For months I sat at my window and watched the trains go by. They never reminded me of anything and it never entered my head to make comparisons,

so I never got tired of seeing them. It was only after I learned that a train is like a snake or a worm and that even the neighborhood was like

something else that I couldn't just watch anymore. I couldn't get it out of my head that I wasn't seeing the train, that I wasn't living where I was.

Learning sure ruined trains for me. Their rhythm, their time-table rightness, their sounds: everything. It got so I had to move, but it hasn't helped much.

This Is The Life

Quasimodo, Toulouse-Lautrec, Joan of Arc and I are in our favorite bar. It is not the Ritz but it fits us. I used to do my drinking in Long Beach, Cal. but what a mistake that was,

especially in my present condition: I am a withered misshapen man. Noteriety was the last thing I wanted, but for some reason I was the Saloon King of the Beach Cities. Nautical

queens of hygienic mien offered a free short-arm inspection; marauding youths advanced reckless trips to get my ashes hauled; fancy Dans in leather glens bought whirling rounds to

touch my fantastic lucky hump. But I was not at home in those places. Unpleasantries were frequent; I could never reach general agreements or avoid arguments. But now:

Talouse and I see eye to eye to almost every subject; Quasimodo never gets his back up over anything; and Joan seldom gets hot under the collar even when somebody wants to talk about religion.

In The Dirty Book Store

My God, what a crowd this morning. As usual I am wearing a false mustache and my vagabond knave's disguise, but I am small change compared to the

rest. At my left is the Superintendent of Schools in high drag, over there my former Sunday School teacher in a wino's get-up. A plain-clothesman

is fingering The Nudie Newsletter. He is right to do this, there may be a felon hiding between the pages. My associates here are in a dilemma. They

do not know which dirty book to buy: Nudie Teener, Nudie Matron, or Senile Nudes. Usually I ... wait, what is this? Rough trade or a proprietor? Help

me? Yes, you could. I'm looking for a '57 copy of the New Yorker, and I ... you don't carry the New Yorker? No, thank you, Nudie New Yorker won't do.

As I turn, my mustache falls off. Quickly I duck my head, assuming a new guise of crotchety sexagenarian, and I lean on my imaginary cane and make it for home.

The Tonsilectomy

In the bed next to mine in the cheapy's ward, a man died from the whooping cough. At three p.m. he gave a final snarl. His soul flew out of the permanently gaped mouth, staggered a little uncertainly in the real air, then made a bee-line for the light.

The next morning I went under the sodium pentothal in an unusual pre-operative position: hands locked across my mouth in a death grip.

The Bird Man of Long Beach

He is a sober gentleman whose only extravagance is A gaudy war surplus parachute. When the wind is Right he buckles himself into the gear and flies Alone. A pegged rope retains him as he angles up Like a kite. Aloft he laughs aloud.

On halcyon days he goes out anyway, standing in His harness, the loftless chute a ton of down. He Looks up at the sky longingly, pulls from his beer, Looks again. Then he waits, bandy-legged, plumeless.

He is praying for a mistral, a hot whopping gut-snapper Of a gale to catapult him into the blue, to carry him Up and out til the inessential land melts away and Sublunary is only the condition of the moment.

Success

Ever since I was a kid, my parents have always been after me to get a head. Well, I tried off

and on for years, but something always got in the way. Even in college I just couldn't do

it. Now, though, everything has turned out all right. I've done it. It's a woman's

head, but I guess that doesn't make any difference. I did a rough job hacking it

off, too, because I was scared but all that's over now. I hope Mom and Dad are proud.

Looking For a Place To Live

I should have known today would be like yesterday, yesterday when a mad old lady turned down our offer to convert her rummage-sale duplex into a palace. So when Mr. Manners shows up in his pants with the enormous, sagging crotch and his neon Masonic tie-tack, I begin to get wary. Then I see he has the shakes, and since a man who drinks can't be all bad I loosen up. Wrong again.

"What line you in, son?" he asks.

"I'm a teacher," I reply, a statement which moves him to shake my hand for the fifth time.

"God bless you," he says.

?

"People right up ahead of you are swell kids," he says. "My wife and I just love 'em, love 'em. Tom's wife had uremic poisoning once." I am still smiling, but should I smile at uremic poisoning? I frown and walk into the bathroom. He follows me in and sits on the john.

"New johnny seat," he says. "Try it."

Good Lord. He follows me out and points to the back of the house.

"Little lady back there's a jewel. Cute as a button." I look out the window and the object of our conversation leans out the back door and spits into the lawn. She does not even faintly resemble a button. My wife asks if the neighborhood is quiet. We receive an odd answer.

"Not a Negro," he says. "Not a Negro for blocks. I was on a train once with 50 Negroes and they all had colds."

Something snaps in my head.

"Listen," I say. "I kind of like Negroes. In fact, my Mother was a Negro."

He steps back, horror written all over his face. He grabs for his Shriner pin and holds it out in front of him like the Good Doctor repelling Count Dracula.

"You're a macaroon," he screams.

"Octoroon," I answer. Besides, sir, I didn't tell you about our pets. We've got a weasel and a octopus and once a year the phoenix resurrects itself in our front room. Well you know what that does to our chances for a good policy, eh?"

"Get out," he shouts. Then he looks at my mustache and adds, "You Bolshevik transvestite."

In the car I tell my wife that his last line was a good one. She just says how she loves me. What a good girl she is.

The New House

There is no one in the new house but me on this low gray day. Still I do not feel comfortably alone.

The landlady said that before us the place had been taken by only single men and once by a thin, unhappy girl. Then

that is what I feel. The old loneliness still roams the house looking -- as they did -- for something to do, someplace

to go, someone to love. It is powerful stuff, it invades me and I think their thoughts of food, sex,

suicide. I am drawn downstairs and although I do not like sweets I eat cookies covered with honey and butter. I leave off gorging

only because lust overcomes my hunger. Locked in the bathroom, scores of naked women gyrate before my half-closed eyes. Afterwards

I choose a kitchen knife with mad deliberation and slit my wrist. The pain is exorcism enough and, frightened, I stop the blood,

bind my wound. I tell my wife nothing, but that night while she sleeps I rise and explore -- peering into closets,

creeping into dim rooms. Finally I return to bed and am awakened only by the morning. The next day I sit, poised,

waiting, but everything seems normal: the fire burns, walls sigh, the cat smooths her bristled fur: Good enough. Peace, house -- we bring you love.

Youngish-Old Man in the City

Married and divorced, harried and of-coursed into a sit-down job he doesn't like, he buys a bike for exercise and

on its side it lies, broken, unspoken,
a token to health.

He does not know what to do in his
loneliness, is a fan of Onan but
worries about his spine (in high school
he saw a boy collapse. The Coach
discussed the crime and he stared at
his guilty palm.)

He is not used to courting in the city,
so he goes to pigeon-parks and birds
drop on his knee while girls laugh at
his brogans. Women snub him, beg off
dates to wash their levis or spoon
him in the halls but save it for a
midnight crooner.

Not odd enough to be queer, not queer
enough to be gay, he fights the freeways in
the double dark. Spurned in the land of
the eunuchs there is still no hope for him
in Stallion Alley. What is there to do but
write home:

Dear Ma,

This is some place. Lots of girls are after
me here, but don't you worry about me this
time! Say, you'd really like it out here.
All the free orange juice you can drink!! I
think I saw Duke Wayne in Hollywood, Ma, but
he was wearing loafers. Ha. Ha. Must close for
now as I have a lot to do.

Love, Your Son

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Love Story

Truly Lovely's boyfriend comes tonight. Within
the hour, to be timely. Assuming a pose she finds
sectionally attractive, she weights on the bunk, a
little heavy in the can.

Suddenly in the lightness it is he, the literary
leader
of unpaginated existence, Bruce Proust, Latin Lover.
"Brucae," she cries in accents sweet and learned.

"America est pulchra, baby," Bruce rejoins her.
"Amoo," she says, milking her accent for all it's worth.
"Amass, amat," he answers. "What is there but heaps of it and a place to go down for the count?"

Unworthy I am, she ponders, of a mind like that.
And up she jumps to elude Bruce's pentultimate Latin smile: cha-chagrin.

A U T H O R ' S N O T E S

I'm 27, and live in Pasadena. I'd like to think that I'm a good horse-player. I went to the Univ. of Ill. for my B.A. and to the Univ. of Ariz. for my M.A. I think I wrote my first poem at about age 24 or so, and in fact that first one just got picked up by Ting (a new mag fm. Venice, Calif -- first issue due in Jan. of '68). After that I didn't write anything for a while and then started writing crazy word things like John Lennon's. Nobody wanted them, so I quit for a while again. Then about a year ago I started writing quite a lot and just about Christmas time in 1966, Leon Spiro from the Sausalito-Belvedere Gazette picked up and published one of them. My other 30 or so acceptances have all come within 1967. I haven't been writing a whole lot lately. I don't know why I write at all, but I know it makes me nervous if I don't. I don't have any particular habits that are interesting and I'm not sure who influences me. I think Gerry Locklin, a poet who lives in Long Beach, is responsible for a lot of my energy. We met in Arizona when he was being published and I didn't know what being published was. We drink together and talk about everything but the life-of-the-artist bullshit and somehow we shore each other up. We both have good women to take care of us, too. I live in Pasadena and am a sort of recluse.

Poems published: Sausalito-Belvedere Gazette (1), Occident (1), and Western Humanities Review (1).
Poems pending publication: Abyss (1), Bay Podium (2), Grande Ronde Review (3), Lung Socket, an anthology (1), Maelstrom (2), Ting (10), Trace (2), and, yes, Wormwood (10 - center section booklet).

-- Ronald B. Koertge

Pasadena, California